Yoko Wada, ed. *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*. D.S. Brewer, 2003. pp. vi+ 258

"A Companion" seems an apt title for a collection of essays on the early thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*, since this work can best be understood, in its original conception, as a companion for three gentlewomen who had chosen a life of asceticism and enclosure. Yoko Wada, who has contributed a very full and clear introduction to this volume as well as being its editor, emphasises the practicality and accessibility of *Ancrene Wisse*, and this companion itself is a practical and accessible introduction to *Ancrene Wisse* studies while also keeping *Ancrene Wisse* scholars abreast of the latest research and developments.

Bella Millett has pointed out that, "In the past few years [...] there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of the audience–particularly the female audience–in shaping the works of the *AW* Group."[1] Many of the eleven essays in this volume deal with the audience and readership of *Ancrene Wisse* either at the time of its earliest versions or as read in later centuries; some repetition is therefore inevitable. The textual history of *Ancrene Wisse*, its various versions, translations, and adaptations, is long and complicated, and a number of the contributors address the various manuscripts in which versions of *Ancrene Wisse* appears. Wada reviews E. J. Dobson's major work on establishing the origins of *Ancrene Wisse* and the connections between the manuscripts, and includes Dobson's stemma to show these relationships (pp. 10 & 11). A. S. G. Edwards provides a list and clear account of the nine surviving Middle English versions of the *Ancrene Wisse* at the beginning of his essay on the early English manuscripts and their readers.

Three papers–those by Bella Millett, Richard Dance, and Nicholas Watson–are essential reading for any graduate student

interested in *Ancrene Wisse*. All are examples of scholarship at its best, eschewing jargon to provide clear and readable accounts of issues which place *Ancrene Wisse* in the larger field of medieval studies. Millett claims that while the work presents itself as a rule, it is "something of a paradox" (40); she suggests that this has something to do with the problems associated with offering guidance to religious women in this historical period–especially women who were marginal in the way lay-anchoresses were.

Dance's paper is on the language of *Ancrene Wisse* known as "AB," a subject which can seem daunting to literature specialists, but, as he points out, considerations of language should not be confined to philologists and linguists. The language manifest in these texts is not only a literate language; it is also literary. The wide vocabulary employed and the author's lexical choices say much about the stylistic mode and about how that language could be used for literary ends.

Nicholas Watson places *Ancrene Wisse* within the context of the development of an English vernacular theology, a term he has defined at length in an article on Arundel's Constitutions.[2] Watson argues that use of material borrowed from *Ancrene Wisse* in such works as Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and The Chastising of God's Children points towards the "laicization" of devotional works. Watson's essay is particularly valuable in showing a way forward for further research–of the kind undertaken by Christina von Nolcken for her paper on the Pepys version of *Ancrene Wisse* known as "The Recluse"–while suggesting something of the richness of *Ancrene Wisse*. The opening words of his paper serve as a worthy comment on the whole volume:

> As a volume like this testifies, *Ancrene Wisse* and the works associated with it set some of the most intransigent puzzles Middle English scholars have faced, posing endless questions while tantalizing us with the hope that works as rich as these must yield their secrets. (197)

Three papers, by Anne Savage, Elizabeth Robertson, and Catherine Innes-Parker, deal specifically with the female readership or audience of *Ancrene Wisse*. Savage argues that the readers had some agency in the construction of the text (this being part of a larger argument that communal authorship can be an important concept for medieval studies in general as well as advancing our understanding of *Ancrene Wisse*). Certainly it seems that the [male] author of *Ancrene Wisse* knew the anchoresses who were its original readership, and the work is often descriptive as well as prescriptive.

Robertson suggests that the "original philological interest" in *Ancrene Wisse* has been replaced by a study of it "for the information it provides" (111). Her own interest is in the reading experience of the original three anchoritic readers and the later, larger, community that the Corpus Christi 402 manuscript was adapted for. While Robertson asks what sort of text *Ancrene Wisse* is, her concern is not, as Millett's is, with the genre of the work but with how the text was read: what was the experience of reading it like for the anchoress? She proposes that, "If this is a 'how to' manual, what it teaches is how to die," (114) and, while *Ancrene Wisse* does teach its readers how to be dead to the world, the experience of reading it is liberating rather than melancholic.

Innes-Parker is concerned not just with these three women but with how *Ancrene Wisse* "was used and adapted to suit the needs of varied audiences; and what this might suggest, in particular, about the women readers for whom *Ancrene Wisse* and its descendants seem to have held a particular appeal" (146). Innes-Parker's argument for the importance of female reading communities from the 13th through to the 15th centuries is particularly interesting. The femaleness of the readership is not, however, an issue with all the contributors to this volume. Recent research seems to have moved away from concern with *Ancrene Wisse* as a work primarily–or only–of interest to female readers (medieval and

modern) and feminist scholars towards placing it in the wider context of the development of vernacular devotional literature in England in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The collection is of a generally high standard, but there are, unfortunately, a few typographical errors in this book (including one repeated paragraph on pages 52 and 53). These rarely cause confusion, though the reference to "Parts VI and VI" on page 90 is problematical, and I wasn't sure whether "agon," on page 134 was intended as such, or meant as *agony*. Of more concern is Anne Savage's reference to Bella Millett's article on *Ancrene Wisse* and Books of Hours "in this volume" (45); in fact, Millett's paper "*Ancrene Wisse* and the Book of Hours" appeared in *Writing Religious Women* in 2000.[3]

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END NOTES

[1] Bella Millett, with the assistance of George B. Jack and Yoko Wada, *Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature: Vol. II. Ancrene Wisse, The Katherine Group, and the Wooing Group* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), p. 16.

[2] Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70.3(1995): 822-864; p. 823, n.4.

[3] *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead (Cardiff: U Wales P, 2000), pp. 21-40.